

Buddhism in the Iron Horse Age

Much is said these days about crisis: overpopulation, the limits of Industrial growth, exhaustion of non-renewable resources, and ecological perils such as the critical diminution of atmospheric oxygen due to pollution of the oceans and the poisoning of plankton.

Yet crisis and opportunity go hand in hand, as is conveyed by the well-known "crisis" hexagram from the *I Ching*. And looking back through history, we find at least two instances in which a challenge to our survival was the occasion for an evolutionary leap. Firstly, when as humanoids expelled by climactic changes from the abundance of African forests, we needed to carry weapons for protection against predators, and so developed an upright posture that allowed us to free our hands; secondly, when responding to the challenge of a drying planet, we developed the first civilization. Once more, students of the future tell us, we cannot survive without radical transformation, and they envisage a "trans-industrial" society characterized by, among other things, a reorientation around central values of existence. And it is easy to agree with the view that only a process of collective spiritualization can counteract the rigidity of our ingrained -and dangerously obsolete-ways of relating to self, others, and the world. At any rate, what we need most in the face of crisis (and its attendant turmoil and pain) is wisdom and compassion, i. e., the fruits of the spiritual path.

That we come to our critical times after a massive awakening of spiritual concern, may be regarded as an instance of that coherence, frequently observed in life, that impresses us with wonder and awe in its intimation of a preestablished design. The diffusion of esoteric ideas and the migration of Oriental spiritual teachers to the West seems a part of that coherence. Just as our learning to use weapons defensively some three million years ago has been regarded as a "pre-adaptation" to the times of scarcity when our remote ancestors were obliged to become hunters, we may come to see our time of drinking from the great spiritual lineage of the East as a pre-adaptation to a stage of history when circumstances will require that we manifest our full capacity.

Although every religion, including Christianity, reflects the spiritual revival of our day, it may be said that Buddhism stands out more than any other in the history of our cultural wave -particularly in the history of the "California Phenomenon," in which it first took root in the late nineteen-fifties before radiating to the rest of the Western world. Although Vedanta had been introduced decades earlier by Vivekananda, and Yogananda had already settled in California, it was Zen Buddhism (divulged mostly through the books of D. T. Suzuki) with which new seekers resonated most and which became most influential in our "consciousness revolution."

Perhaps one reason for this was the notion of original perfection, the indwelling Buddha-nature emphasized by the Mahayana, which appealed to the many who had had glimpses of the divine-within through psychedelics. Very probably, another factor was a relative de-emphasis on sin, of which a guilt-conscious generation wanted to hear no more. More important, however, was the appeal of a non-dogmatic, eminently experiential path and the hope of enlightenment aroused by the sense of a powerful lineage, an efficacious chain of spiritual transmission.

Buddhism is to the East what Christianity is to the West-not just the dominant religion, but one integrating in its message the basic features of an earlier heritage. Just as Christianity embraces the essentials of Jewish spirituality, Buddhism embraces the essentials of the Indian tradition: the concepts of maya and karma, the attitude of renunciation, the path of meditation. And though Christianity and Buddhism coincide in exalting love and virtue, they are in contrast in other regards-a contrast most apparent when we consider the Buddhism of earlier centuries, now preserved in the Theravadin tradition: Christianity is theistic, Buddhism, non-theistic; Christianity like Judaism, is essentially a path of worship, whereas Buddhism, rooted in the yogic tradition of India, is a religion of mind cultivation.

It has been asserted that one of our most urgent tasks is that of world unification, and that this will involve, especially, the integration of Eastern and Western world-views. If this is so, the process is well under way particularly with the coming of Buddhism to the West. For Buddhism is, particularly in its later and more integrative development, a great synthesis of Asiatic experience. Buddhism in its evolution has effected a synthesis of elements not integrated within our own culture, viz.; the non-theistic perspective of science and the theistic outlook of our Judeo-Christian heritage; therefore we may expect that what we learn from it may facilitate our own internal coherence.

Such a synthesis is most developed in Tantric Buddhism, which also embodies an integration of yoga and worship and a balance between withdrawal from the world and committed participation.

Other than sheer spiritual power, there are two traits of Tibetan Buddhism that seem particularly fitting to its implantation in our midst: its multi-dimensionality and its plasticity. The multi-dimensionality of its explicit or systematic aspect is not only multi-faceted but comprehensive in its intent of approaching every domain of experience as a means of enlightenment. Plasticity is an understanding, and the corresponding teaching skill, of how to work beyond established forms. The multi-dimensional aspect of the Vajrayana goes well with our strong inclination toward integration and wholeness; its plasticity, with our appreciation for creativity, as well as with our need of a transmission that can effectively bridge the cultural gap, and with the eventual need to develop a path suited to our specific psycho-cultural circumstances.

We are again impressed with the sense of a pre-established design in the course of events when we consider the coincidence of the Tibetan diaspora with our time of turning to the East, to the trans-personal " and to the best-trained resource people on the matter of human unfoldment. It would seem that the Tibetan seed has exploded the centuries-old capsule within which it ripened and has fallen on receptive earth at the season when its contents can best be absorbed.